

Town of Amenia
Comprehensive plan Implementation Committee
May 22, 2006

Present: Mark Doyle, Rudy Eschbach, George Fenn, Bill Flood, Darlene Riemer, Tony Robustelli, Joel Russell.
Guests: Leo Blackman, Moira Kelly, Tom Werner.

The Committee read and approved the minutes for May 15.

Joel Russell said that, since there was a great deal of controversy regarding new zoning in two specific areas of town: the hamlet proper and Rte 22 running north to the Foodtown Plaza, he felt it would be helpful to invite the opinion of an outside expert whose focus is on providing detailed site planning. Patrick Pinnell, rather than developing a plan for Amenia, had instead provided a method and way of thinking for the Town to come up with a plan. He then read P. Pinnell's report, which follows in its entirety. Comments by Committee members are added at the end of the report.

TO: AMENIA COMPREHENSIVE PLAN IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE
FROM: JOEL RUSSELL
RE: PATRICK PINNELL'S ANALYSIS OF THE "AMENIA NORTH" AREA
DATE: May 21, 2006

"I have been engaging in a dialogue with my colleague, architect and town planner Patrick Pinnell, about planning for the area north of the hamlet center, in the general vicinity of the Food Town Plaza. He has challenged us to think about this area in some unaccustomed ways.

These are not really new ways of thinking. Patrick says he is issuing "a challenge to people to reacquire the common-sense planning skills of our ancestors." Please keep in mind that he has not really given you a plan for the hamlet; rather he has suggested a method that you can apply using common sense and your own intimate knowledge of the land and the community. He has drawn some maps that will be presented at our meeting on the 22nd to illustrate this method.

Here are some of his key points:

1. Our thinking has become paralyzed by the constraints of the existing road system. We forget that the historical evolution of towns has always involved incremental additions to the road system, along what he calls "seams" and "connections." By looking at historical maps and projecting forward, he

has identified some of these.

2. We need to think about adding roads for both residential and commercial development, and some of these new roads can be good locations for uses that do not belong along major existing roads, especially at an important community “gateway.” Adding roads does not have to be at the Town’s expense. When a street is built strategically it adds value to property opened up by it. It is therefore cost-effective for property owners and developers to build it, with or without government financial participation. Government should not, however, require the new street to be built beyond the size and quality needed to perform well. New streets should also vary, having a character appropriate to their neighborhoods and uses, and it should be possible to grow or shrink them over time.

3. New roads can also be built to serve different functions: “A” streets can be designed to have a high quality pedestrian experience by locating attractive uses with many pedestrian amenities. “B” streets can be designed more for vehicular access purposes and for uses that are necessary but do not contribute to the pedestrian or scenic character of the community. Visually prominent locations on roads such as Rte 44, Rte 22 and Rte 343, the major arteries leading into town, should be given special consideration so as to preserve “community gateways”. “B” Streets would be a more appropriate location for auto-oriented service businesses.

4. The street system is the basic skeleton of a town plan. Any zoning that is done should be in keeping with that street system and should observe certain basic principles:

- Buildings that face each other across a pedestrian-oriented or residential street should generally be zoned the same to provide a coherent and harmonious character to the street and to satisfy the expectations of landowners that they will face something similar in character to their own property. This does not apply to high-speed arterials, such as Routes 22, 44, and 343 outside of the central hamlet, because these roads create a barrier between the properties on either side, and there is little connection, pedestrian or otherwise, between opposite sides of the road.
- Zoning lines should generally fall along rear property lines, in the middle of blocks, so that the lots back up to properties in other zones rather than facing properties in other zones.
- Where the streets are far apart, the rear property lines, where the zoning lines should be located, can eventually become the “seams” along which new streets

can be built in the future. These streets can have a different character and zoning designation than the existing streets, responding to changing needs and community desires. Over time, the street system and mix of uses can in this way become more fine-grained, as development intensifies the use of land, maintaining community character while allowing for change and growth.

- Zoning designations should not just cast in concrete what is there today; they should embrace a vision for what will be desired in the future. Thus, Patrick has encouraged us to reconsider the Highway Commercial designation of the Food Town Plaza area to encourage it to eventually develop more of a hamlet character by in filling that area with new streets and blocks and a more fine-grained mix of uses. The buildings on this site will not be there forever, and the next generation of development there could be much more in keeping with the historic patterns of Amenia, while still allowing for the kinds of uses people want, such as a supermarket, department store, garden store, etc. In Patrick's words, "when the supermarket area at that crucial fork is labeled "Highway Commercial", it means that the town is setting its sights very low indeed because of the current state. Just because something is built in an auto-oriented form there right now doesn't mean you couldn't zone it to get better, mixed-use development later on. (Why not have housing next to a supermarket, for crying out loud?)"

The biggest obstacle to developing a new road system is the presence of wetlands that make certain connections difficult. However, over time some of these obstacles can be overcome. Also, some of the connections can initially be made as pedestrian trails and eventually be turned into roads when and if needed.

5. A new grid of streets can be built between the Food Town Plaza and existing hamlet center. This could absorb a lot of new population growth in the Town, rather than scattering it around the scenic hillsides, and there would be a possibility of siting a sewage treatment plant there that could serve both the new development and the existing Town Center. Because it is all undeveloped, there are no immediate neighbors on the interior of these large parcels.

6. Patrick suggests that an east-west "B street" could be located on the north side of the grocery store, parallel to the historic road to the north (Hamms Road). Jack's and similar uses could be on the south side of this new street. The north side of such a street will back up

to the houses on Hamms Road, so the uses should make an attractive transition to that road. Patrick has suggested that a greenhouse-type small sewage treatment plant could go here. (I know that sounds odd, but some of the newer technologies that use greenhouses and plants to treat sewage are actually visual amenities rather than eyesores.) With attractive transitional uses on the north side of the new street, it may be possible to locate Jack's and similar uses on the south side, while also providing sewage treatment for the redevelopment of the grocery store plaza as a mixed use hamlet and the area of the old racetrack as a hamlet residential neighborhood.

Patrick comments: "The great architect James Sterling once told me that when he was faced with a couple of different problems, the first thing he would try was to put them together to see if they helped solve each other. Putting Jack's together with eco-friendly sewage treatment greenhouses, at the head of that little brook wetlands area (increase the flow and the infiltration) funneling down toward the cemetery, might even work."

I hope that these comments are helpful to CPIC in thinking about how to plan for the future of the Amenia Town Center and how to reconcile the desire to preserve the hamlet's historic character with the need to accommodate uses that are needed but difficult to site in the hamlet setting as it exists today.

Next Steps

If the approach described in this memorandum makes sense to you, the next steps would be:

- (1) To write the above street recommendations and/or those developed by CPIC, into the Comprehensive Plan update; and
- (2) To revise the zoning map to reflect the principles described above.

This would not involve a major change in the proposed zoning map, but may involve shifting a few boundary lines. The integrity of the visual gateway into Amenia from the north should be preserved, and uses such as Jack's should be allowed to be sited off of Route 22 as suggested in number 6 above.

Comments/Discussion:

J. Russell and M. Doyle passed out a set of maps outlining potential new roads and areas of development and pointed out that P. Pinnell did not have time to study the new zoning draft, nor to design a plan and that some of the suggestions regarding new roads were not realistic due to the presence of wetlands.

J. Russell: There is potential to develop this area into another viable part of the hamlet with enough residences to support larger scale

commercial enterprise. This could be designed in a way which would not look like big boxes and in the long run would contribute to both the existing hamlets and to Amenia.

The service roads would run behind the main roads and commercial uses which are inappropriate elsewhere could be established there.

D. Riemer: The oval of the old racetrack is still visible on aerial photographs and development of that area was discussed as early as 1991 and focusing commercial uses in that area is very logical and appropriate.

G. Fenn added that the town of Salisbury, which is thought of as an urban creation which should not be emulated, has actually very cleverly preserved natural settings and successfully hidden commercial enterprise within one small block.

R. Eschbach: Wilton CT, for the purpose of keeping itself 'historic', has created a new commercial area literally on the other side of the tracks on a "B" road - it was landscaped in such a way as to be unobtrusive and has not changed the character of the town. There are about 20 stores in that small plaza. We could have a "B" street which would have common access with Foodtown Plaza. T. Robustelli asked how that could be accomplished - if someone came in wanting to do this, is it something that will be possible? Why zone for it, if it can't be done?.

J. Russell: You have to have more than one entrance - ideally off Rte 343 - he then acknowledged the constraints imposed by the wetlands. M Doyle suggested a four-way intersection off Cascade Road.

B. Flood and D. Riemer mentioned the option of creating condominiums (multi-family residential) across the street from the plaza which would create pedestrian traffic to support the businesses in both the proposed new development and in the Town center.

The size of such buildings needs to be limited in order to preserve the view shed.

J. Russell summed up what he felt was the general agreement of the Committee -

"leave the west side of Rte 22 residential and concentrate new business in one area off the east side." One way of accomplishing that, according to P. Pinnell, is to persuade the State to change the configuration of Rte 22 by making it a walkable street, narrowing the road to calm the traffic and installing a traffic light where pedestrians can cross.

Following P. Pinnell's suggestion, the Committee agreed to change the zoning designation around Foodtown Plaza from HC to HR.

B. Flood said that DEC would not allow the construction of roads in the area - J. Russell responded that some of the regulations may change over time. R. Eschbach added that, if a good argument can be made for

the necessity of the roads and, if the wetlands can be protected, a walkway or bike trail at least should be possible. J. Russell: technology has progressed to where less invasive roads can be built. B. Flood said that the school would be sold and commercial development would happen in that location first. Also he saw no danger of big box construction as a. they would not fit, and b. there is no demand for them. M. Doyle and J. Russell said that there is a short term process of zoning, supplying what is needed now, and a long term process to provide for the future. The Comprehensive Plan directs what may be done in 5 to 10 years and the zoning is guided by that direction. J. Russell then asked, whether the Committee was comfortable with having the gist of the discussion and the thoughts behind it included in the new language, making some adjustment to the zoning on the east side and 'tweaking' the maps. M. Doyle suggested extending the HR designation north beyond Cascade intersection up to Folan road which is a natural borderline.

Leo Blackman thought that the extension of the hamlet north makes a lot of sense but said he was confused about 'Highway Commercial'. J. Russell said that as it stands now maps show HC only where it already exists. Moira Kelly asked whether it would be possible to construct bridges to allow pedestrian traffic to Foodtown Plaza - she added that she has watched people walking on Rte 22 north and that she is afraid of possible accidents. J. Russell said that foot paths and bike paths are increasingly allowed as long as precautions are taken to protect the wetlands. One of the functions of a Comprehensive Plan is to make it very clear to the State that, if any changes are to be made to the roads/highways, this is what the town wants. The DOT is starting to listen. It would also be a good idea to have an engineer look at the concept plan and conduct a feasibility study. T. Werner: Sinpatch would welcome any kind of development which is not wanted here.

(For the next few minutes the guests in in the room were talking very loudly among themselves and it is impossible to understand who said what.)

J. Russell: There are many ways to preserve the historic character of the Town - they involve different levels of bureaucracy and administration: one way is the historic district; my sense was that the community was not ready for that. Another way is to have historic zoning - an overlay zone - and I am beginning to think that this makes the most sense. So far we have recommended that certain design guidelines have to be followed in the hamlet - we have to decide what triggers a review - building a house, making modifications? B. Flood: anything that is visible from the road, mainly the facade. The Planning

Board should make the final decisions. J. Russell: the committee has to define the boundaries; as the areas which will be designated 'historic' fall into different zoning districts (HR, RR) an overlay would be the best solution. B. Flood/M. Doyle: what about demolition - how does that work? J. Russell: the most common way is called "demolition delay" - a waiting period, during which the building is studied to determine whether it has historic significance. After a six-month period you have to make it available to be moved off-site. Some communities require that a building has to be replaced with another of the same character. R. Eschbach: we have an historical inventory which identifies buildings - how do you deal with one house, which is isolated in a rural area?. M. Doyle: let's use that list as an absolute. J. Russell: telling someone that he cannot tear down a house raises legal questions;; creating an historic district has more safeguards built into it. M. Doyle: we want to create something which will not prolong this process or create controversy. D. Riemer: we should allow an owner of a historic building to apply for historic designation with the State , if he chooses to - an historic overlay will be helpful. J. Russell will work on language to encompass these suggestions.

J. Russell: People have suggested that the Town have its own wetlands ordinance.

So far the zoning picks up on what is already regulated by the State - does the Town want to go beyond that by protecting smaller areas? M. Doyle: a town-wide map is currently created by Hudsonia which points out smaller but critical habitat areas,(including fens, lime deposits and vernal pools) which will be very accurate and should be part of the planning process. J. Russell: a mention of this map should be included in the zoning text, the question is how do you enforce it: do you require a site review, do you tell them not to build on that land? We could say that it is a case-by-case ordinance and the final decision is up to the Planning Board.

B. Flood: Connecticut has a wetlands commission - it has to be consulted and has the final word. A developer knows up front what can and can not be done.

J. Russell: we are planning to set up something like it with the 'Conservation Analysis Process'. The CAC can do the analysis and has the ability to make recommendations. Combined with the Hudsonia map this will almost accomplish the same thing as the wetlands commission in Connecticut.

M. Doyle: we will need more expert help to set up a logging permit system.

J. Russell: the Town should retain a consultant forester to advise it on logging as well as a consultant for wetlands protection. M. Doyle: the expense could be shared by small towns in the area. J. Russell: since you have the Hudsonia map, you could call them and ask them to

verify specific locations.

B. Flood: can 'open space' be non-contiguous? J. Russell: yes, as long as it makes sense- it has to be based on a conservation analysis. Will re-write the section to make it clearer and possibly use the word "unfragmented" rather than contiguous. (Page 36, 121.19 B)

B. Flood asked about work-force housing. J. Russell: people should be able to house their employees on their property. We have to provide for the possibility that down the road an owner may convert housing and rent/ sell it at market value. A fee might be imposed on the owner, if that happens. This will be included in the revised text.

M. Doyle: two maps of scenic views are widely different depending on whether they show view sheds visible from two- or-more or three-or-more sites. Similar maps were created some time in the late '70s and were included in the 1991 Master Plan.

J. Russell: you will have to draw some smooth lines - start with the least restrictive map and ask how significant are the places in the more restrictive map. M. Doyle said that he had started creating a map which included criteria of slope and altitude and excluded hamlet development areas (HM, HR, SR).

J. Russell: this triggers a site-plan review - take the map and determine whether to apply the standards in the code to the area. If it is on a - computer generated and very exact - map, that means it is visible - the current language is redundant and will be amended.

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 5 at 7:00 PM.

Submitted by Monique Montaigne
May 31, 2006